

What is the evidence for the efficacy of pair and group work?

David Barker

Gifu University, Faculty of Education

Introduction

In traditional language classes where Grammar-Translation was the dominant methodology, the teacher was the central figure in every exchange. Little or no interaction took place among the learners themselves. The Audio-Lingual Method that came to dominate formal language instruction in the middle of the twentieth century took this philosophy a step further by strictly prohibiting interactions between learners because it was believed that exposure to non-standard models of English would have a detrimental effect on language development.

As the “behaviorist” theories upon which the Audio-Lingual Method was based came under scrutiny, researchers began to look at the role that authentic interactions might play in second language acquisition, a trend that eventually led to the “Communicative Language Teaching” (CLT) revolution of the 1980s. Unlike its predecessors, CLT placed great emphasis on activities that required learners to interact with their peers in the target language.

Since the advent of CLT, pair and group activities have become a staple of language teaching in classrooms all over the world, and virtually all modern language teaching methodologies and materials are based on the assumption that learners can develop their proficiency by talking to each other. In this article, I will look at some of the reasons why this change in attitudes came about and investigate how far it was based on evidence from research.

Making the Case for Pair Activities and Group Work

Ever since languages were first taught in formal settings, teachers have had to deal with the fact that the time available for them to interact with individual students gets progressively smaller as classes grow larger. Many believed that this problem had been solved by the Audio-Lingual Method, as all that was required for successful learning under that paradigm was accurate modeling of target language patterns followed by extensive repetition by the learners. However, the popularity of Audio-Lingualism declined in the United States towards the end of the 1960s as researchers began to question the theoretical assumptions on which it was based, primarily the notion that language learning was a matter of the formation of “habits.” At the same time, dissatisfaction was also growing with “Situational Language Teaching,” the dominant method of teaching languages in Britain at the time as this was also, according to Long, based on “a type of behaviorist habit-learning theory” (Long, 1986, p. 35).

As awareness of the limitations of “lockstep” teaching patterns grew, some writers began to advocate pair activities and group work as a way of maximizing the amount of time available to learners to practice the target language in the classroom. The growth of this movement led to a burst of research into the effectiveness of learner interaction and the role of input in Second Language Acquisition (SLA¹) from the early 1980s, culminating in a number of reviews and books published in the middle of the decade (see, for example, Long & Porter, 1985, and Gass & Madden, 1985).

One early discussion of learner interaction was a paper by Long (1977) that considered the use of group work in the teaching and learning of second languages. Long pointed out that “it should be recognized that there is little proof that group-work does much of what is often claimed for it in the ELT literature” (p. 287). He also warned of the dangers of thrusting this method upon unprepared and unwilling students and teachers. Nevertheless, he stressed that group work could improve not only the quantity, but also the quality of communicative language practice.

To support his claim, Long described a 1976 study by Long et al. (1976, cited in Long, 1977) which found that students spoke more in group work and used a wider range of speech acts because the nature of the interactions required them to fulfil different roles from the normal teacher-student style of communication. In a later study, Long (1981) found that in interactions between native speakers of English and English learners, questions from the native speakers constituted 96% of all the topic initiations. A major advantage of non-native speaker / non-native speaker (NNS/NNS) interactions was therefore hypothesized to be that they provide learners with the opportunity to play a variety of roles. A further study conducted by Porter (1983, cited in Long and Porter, 1985) supported Long’s findings. It also proposed new justifications for promoting pair activities and group work, claiming that learners were no less careful when speaking to each other than when speaking to teachers, and also that pairs of learners were able to negotiate repairs to conversations in the same way as NS (native speaker) /NNS pairs.

In spite of the support given by these early studies to the idea that interaction between peers could be beneficial for SLA, not everyone was immediately convinced, and there remained (and arguably still remains) a widely held belief among language learners and teachers that the best practice partner is a native or near-native speaker of the language. In particular, as Richards and Rodgers (1986) noted, “a continuing teacher concern has been the possible deleterious effect in pair or group work of imperfect modeling and student error” (p. 79). In spite of teachers’ misgivings, however, Long and Porter (1985) claimed in their review of studies into NNS/NNS interaction that pair activities and group work had become increasingly popular in the language classroom, mainly for pedagogical

¹ A review of second language acquisition, or SLA, literature makes it clear that, as Van Patten and Williams (2007) noted, “in SLA theorizing most people use the term *second* to mean any language other than one’s first language. It makes no difference what the language is, where it is learned, or how it is learned” (p. 6). For the purposes of the following discussion, this will be taken as a working definition of SLA.

reasons such as increasing practice opportunities, promoting a positive affective climate, and motivating learners.

In addition to these arguments, by the mid-1980s many researchers were also claiming a psycholinguistic rationale for using pair and group work. Much of this was based on an increasing focus on the importance of comprehensible input in the learning process. One of the foremost proponents of this idea was Krashen, who claimed that “humans acquire language in only one way – by understanding messages, or by receiving ‘comprehensible input’” (1985, p. 2). Although Krashen subsequently refined his hypothesis, in a paper written almost a decade later he restated his position that “‘comprehensible input’ is the essential environmental ingredient in language acquisition” (1994, p. 46). Others, however, disagreed with the idea that comprehensible input alone is sufficient for language learning to take place. Swain (1985) stressed the importance of output in the learning process. Writing about children who had learned French in the Canadian immersion programs, she noted that variations in input alone were not sufficient to explain key differences in certain aspects of linguistic proficiency between groups of learners.

Regardless of these differences in emphasis, there was general agreement among researchers that comprehensible input was at the very least an important element in SLA. This raised the question of what exactly input is, and how it becomes comprehensible. One commonly cited distinction was that drawn by Corder between “input” and “intake.”

Input is “what goes in,” not what is available for going in, and we may reasonably suppose that it is the learner who controls this input, or more properly, his intake. (Corder, 1967 cited in Gaies, 1983, p. 195)

Gaies (1983) suggested that “what is available” in terms of potential input actually becomes intake through negotiation resulting from feedback given by learners to their interlocutors. He argued that this feedback has the effect of both modifying the input the learner receives and increasing its amount.

Although Gaies’ claims for the potential benefits of negotiation in interactions with native speakers of the target language were reasonable, the realities of classroom language teaching naturally raised another issue, which was summed up by Long and Porter (1985) as follows:

It is impossible for [teachers] to provide enough of such individualized NS/NNS opportunities for all their students. It therefore becomes essential to know whether two (or more) *non*-native speakers working together during group work can perform the same kind of negotiation for meaning. (Long & Porter, 1985, p. 215)

A study by Varonis and Gass (1985b) proposed a model to describe the “vertical” deviations that take place when misunderstandings occur or communication breaks down.

These “negotiation sequences” consist of a *trigger* that causes the breakdown, an *indicator* from the listener that a breakdown has taken place, a *response* from the first speaker, and then finally a *reaction to the response*. Varonis and Gass’s study demonstrated how this process might go through several cycles until a resolution is reached and the conversation is once again able to proceed linearly. Based on their study of the number and length of negotiation exchanges in NS/NNS and NNS/NNS dyads, Varonis and Gass concluded that these types of sequences were far more frequent in NNS/NNS interactions, and claimed that “this negotiation serves the function of providing the participants with a greater amount of comprehensible input” (Gass & Varonis, 1985b, p. 84).

Varonis and Gass made a number of convincing arguments as to why interactions between learners may be more productive than interactions between a learner and a native speaker. These included the lack of worry about losing face when communicating with another learner and the relative ease of communicating with someone with a similar cultural and linguistic background. However, their conclusions that more negotiation routines in a conversation make that conversation more beneficial for learners were questionable. The claim that increased negotiation leads directly to more comprehensible input can be challenged on at least three points:

- 1) The lower number of negotiation routines initiated by learners in exchanges with native speakers may reflect a reluctance to admit a lack of comprehension, but it may equally indicate that the learner is actually receiving a higher level of comprehensible input (i.e. the native speaker’s language is easier to understand, so the learner does not need to signal misunderstanding).
- 2) The fact that a negotiation routine results in comprehension does not mean that the input that was finally comprehended was useful (i.e. accurate) input for a language learner.
- 3) Varonis and Gass made no attempt to ascertain how the learners felt about the two types of interactions. Claiming that extended negotiation sequences facilitate learning is all very well, but those benefits will be greatly reduced if the participants view the exchange as frustrating, clumsy, and something that they would rather avoid in the future, a point that was also made by Aston (1986).

Interestingly, Varonis and Gass’s study used unstructured conversational exchanges for the collection of the NNS/NNS data, explaining that “each dyad was audio-taped in an informal conversation with no instruction other than to talk in English with each other” (p. 72). However, the authors did not make any mention of “structure” as a variable in their article.

In a follow-up study, Varonis and Gass (1985b) attempted to find evidence of the hypothesized benefits of group interaction. Rather than compare NNS/NNS interaction with NS/NNS interaction, the authors chose to focus on how task type affects negotiation

in interactions between learners. They justified the need for their research by claiming that “since nonnative speakers of a language often spend a great deal of time talking with other NNSs, it seems reasonable to investigate the nature of these interactions” (1985b, p. 149). Varonis and Gass's 1985b study used a small group of nine learners with each of the dyads composing subjects of different nationalities. The researchers asked the participants to complete what they called a “one-way” task in which one listener had to draw a picture based on their partner's description. Next, the subjects were given a “two-way” task (what most teachers would now call a jigsaw listening task) where the participants had to combine information received separately in order to find a solution to a problem.

In a previous study, Long (1983) had found a greater amount of modified interaction in two-way tasks than one-way tasks, but Varonis and Gass's study found the opposite. The authors suggested that this may have been a result of their using a different definition of “one-way,” as the tasks used by Long had required less exchange of information than the picture drawing tasks used in their own study. Varonis and Gass identified a number of factors that influenced the amount of negotiation that took place in exchanges between learners, and claimed in their conclusions that “it is precisely NNS-NNS pairs that offer NNSs the greatest opportunity to receive comprehensible input and produce comprehensible output through negotiation” (Varonis & Gass, 1985b, p. 161).

The study described above is cited in a great many later articles as evidence of the beneficial effects of learner interaction. I would argue, however, that it had several limitations. Firstly, the study was small, using only nine subjects. Secondly, the dyads were composed of learners of different nationalities. Depending on the differences in their mother tongues, learners may indeed have to negotiate more to produce output that is comprehensible to their partners, but in monolingual pairs (i.e., the majority of learning situations around the world), it is reasonable to expect that the best way for learners to bring a negotiation routine to a satisfactory conclusion would be to approximate as closely as possible the phonology and syntax of their shared first language. Whilst this would no doubt facilitate comprehension, it would be of very questionable value as input of the target language. This point was also noted by Long and Porter (1985) in their review of studies of group-work and learner interaction. They concluded, however that, “the kind of negotiation work of interest here is also very successfully obtained in groups of students of the same first language background. Things simply seem slightly better with mixed language groups” (p. 224). A third limitation of Varonis and Gass's study was that it did not distinguish between input and output that is comprehensible and input and output that is both comprehensible and correct. More of the former is undoubtedly desirable, but whether more of the latter would aid the learning process or not requires a separate discussion. Finally, as with previous studies, no attempt was made to find out how learners felt about these interactions. Caution should therefore be exercised in citing this study as evidence of the efficacy of NNS/NNS interaction, particularly in the context of learners who share a first language.

The lack of conclusive evidence of the benefits of learner interaction was highlighted by Pica and Doughty in a paper written in 1985 (Pica & Doughty, 1985b): “in light of the increasing popularity of non-native speaker group work in the ESL classroom, it seems surprising that so little research has been conducted in this area” (p. 233). This suggests that even as CLT was reaching its zenith, there was actually very little evidence to support one of its key tenets. Pica and Doughty's own study also examined interactions between pairs of learners of mixed nationalities, but the number of subjects in the study was relatively high (34), and an attempt was made to measure the grammatical accuracy of language produced. Pica and Doughty found that the students got more grammatical input in teacher-fronted work (albeit not directed at any individual), but that they spoke more and had more utterances addressed to them directly in the group discussion. The data showed, however, that students were no more careful in their output in either task, so the increase in grammatically correct input in the teacher-fronted task was purely due to the teacher's participation. One surprising finding of Pica and Doughty's study was that correction and repair appeared to take place more in NNS/NNS work, although the authors noted that the overall amount was very small, and no data of this sort were collected at all in one of the classrooms.

The finding that more negotiation took place in the teacher-fronted activity was also surprising, but the authors suggest that this may have been due to the nature of the tasks. They claimed that:

Selection of decision-making tasks was based on their widespread use in communicative classrooms and their strong reputation for engendering conversational interaction among classroom participants. No matter how potentially communicative these tasks may have seemed to be, they did not guarantee negotiated interaction among classroom participants. (Pica & Doughty, 1985b, p. 245)

Pica and Doughty concluded that “a task must be used which compels individuals to negotiate meaning rather than simply inviting them to participate in conversation” (Pica & Doughty, 1985b, p. 246). Leaving aside the question of whether this faith in the benefits of negotiation was warranted, it seems strange that the researchers would focus so strongly on providing artificial means of promoting authentic communication between learners without even considering the option of leaving learners to decide for themselves what they should talk about. Pica and Doughty's conclusions regarding the role of group work were that caution needed to be exercised in view of the increased exposure to ungrammatical input brought, but that “group work can be heartily endorsed, however, with regard to the amount of practice time it offers students in forming hypotheses about the target language and the opportunities it provides for enhancing development of second language fluency” (Pica & Doughty, 1985b, p. 247).

Although it was not mentioned by the authors of this study, one logical conclusion that could be drawn from its findings is that if the presence of the teacher makes no difference

to the accuracy of a learner's output, and if the teacher is the main source of grammatical input, then perhaps the extended practice provided by group work would be better left to students to do themselves outside the classroom so that more class time would be available to maximize their access to input from the teacher. In other words, a strong argument could be made on the basis of these findings that pair and group work might be more appropriate for independent study than for regular language classes.

Two other notes of caution should be made regarding this study. One is that the fact that it did not attempt to distinguish between pairings of mixed nationalities and monolingual dyads where learners had the option of resorting to their shared L1. The other is that no attempt was made to measure effects on acquisition longitudinally.

An overall lack of longitudinal studies on the effects of learner interaction on acquisition was discussed by Long (1985), who listed the difficulties of showing a direct connection between the two and set out what he argued was a viable alternative:

An alternative, indirect approach, breaks the task down into three steps:

Step 1: Show that (a) linguistic/conversational adjustments promote (b) comprehension of input.

Step 2: Show that (b) comprehensible input promotes (c) acquisition.

Step 3: Deduce that (a) linguistic/conversational adjustments promote (c) acquisition. (Long, 1985, p. 378)

This was the approach taken by all the early studies of NNS interaction, and although several studies had proposed a rationale for pair activities and group work, none had actually shown a direct connection between this type of practice and language acquisition.

Follow-Up Studies

A book published in 1986 entitled *Talking to learn: conversation in second language acquisition* (Day, 1986) contained articles by many of the researchers cited in the previous section, most of whom were following up on their research and developing more specific themes. Having noted in a previous study (Varonis & Gass, 1985b) that gender was a factor in determining the amount of negotiation that takes place in pair work, Gass and Varonis (1986) attempted to find out more about the precise nature of its effect in a study that used only Japanese students to control for ethnic differences. Participants were asked to complete three tasks, the first of which was a conversation task in which "subjects were instructed to converse upon topics of interest to them with no other constraints placed on them" (p. 328). However, as with their previous study, the authors made no specific mention of the concept of unstructured interaction as a factor in the study, focusing mainly in their conclusions on the finding that "while the men appeared to dominate in conversations with women in ways that provided opportunities for producing comprehensible output, women initiated more meaning negotiations than men in mixed-sex dyads" (p. 349).

Of course, anyone with experience of living in Japan would question the degree to which these findings were influenced by cultural norms, a point conceded by the authors. Of more interest were the findings relating to differences between task-based exchanges and free conversation. The authors of the study noted that “overall, the picture tasks evidenced a much greater degree of negotiation than did free conversation” (p. 332). The implication was that the picture task was therefore more conducive to language acquisition, but again, no data were gathered regarding the participants’ impressions of the two exchanges. Possibly the most important finding from this study in terms of the current investigation was that any attempt to compare structured and unstructured exchanges should control for the influence of gender.

Other studies of interest in Day (1986) were papers by Duff (1986), and Porter (1986). Duff also investigated the effect of task type on the amount of negotiation that took place in pair work and concluded that considerable negotiation took place as students engaged in tasks, but that problem-solving tasks provided more opportunities for negotiation than discussion tasks. In her report, Duff stated that “studies that have looked at ‘interlanguage talk’ have consistently shown that speech modifications found in the discourse directed at NNSs ... are instrumental in the SLA process” (p. 148). I would suggest, however, that a more accurate summary of previous research would perhaps be that it had simply demonstrated the existence of variations in the amount of negotiation taking place in different types of interactions and *hypothesized* the effect this would have on the SLA process. Porter’s study itself was inconclusive, finding that both of the task types had advantages and disadvantages.

One interesting feature of Day (1986) was that it included a section entitled “Outside the Classroom.” This contained a paper by Schmidt and Frota (1986) describing the processes by which a learner acquired basic conversational ability in Portuguese over a five-month period. One observation made by the author was that he felt uncomfortable speaking Portuguese with other native-speakers of English outside the classroom, even in groups of mixed nationalities where everyone was speaking that language. He noted that, “it’s so much easier to say [what I want to say] in English that it’s hard to avoid switching” (p. 245). He did, however, mention some examples of situations where he was able to do this.

V decided to come along, and while we were waiting for our ride she insisted that we speak only Portuguese all evening. I agreed. It was a strange feeling, because of the dozen in our group more than half were English teachers, but ... with this group, maybe I can manage it so that it’s English at work, Portuguese after dark. (Schmidt & Frota, 1986, p. 248)

If a person like R (the subject), a trained linguist with a great deal of experience of language learning and teaching who was already fluent in one foreign language, had these feelings about interacting with other native-speakers of his L1 in a foreign language, it is easy to imagine that Japanese students would feel the same way about using English with

their peers.

The focus on the role of interaction in SLA continued with a study by Pica et al. (1987a), which set out to examine the effects on acquisition of two kinds of modified input. The first was pre-modified (simplified) input, and the second was input modified through a process of interaction. The study was based on a hypothesis proposed by Long (e.g. Long, 1985) and Hatch (e.g. Hatch, 1978a) known as the “Interaction Hypothesis,” or “IH.” The basic premise for the IH was summed up by Hatch as follows:

We would like to consider the possibility that ... one learns how to do conversation, one learns how to interact verbally, and out of this interaction syntactic structures are developed. (Hatch, 1978a, p. 404)

In Pica et al.’s study, the findings were that with interaction, both the amount of input the learners received and the overall level of comprehension were significantly higher. However, the study investigated only NS/NNS dyads. Of more relevance to the current investigation was another paper by Pica (1987b) that looked at the limitations of classroom activities in providing opportunity for the kinds of interaction that many researchers had come to believe were crucial to SLA. The following quote is taken from her conclusions:

Classroom events now include discussion-orientated, problem-solving activities, and students are asked frequently to work in groups or pairs rather than in the more traditional teacher-fronted arrangement. (Pica, 1987b, p. 17)

However, Pica went on to say that:

From what has been seen of most classroom activities, the social interaction they provide falls short of what appears to be needed for successful comprehension and production of new words and structures. (Pica, 1987b, p. 17)

If Pica’s observations were correct, this statement would suggest that much of the confidence felt by teachers who use pair and group work in their classes might, in fact, be misplaced. Another study by Pica (1987c) also stressed the importance of negotiation but at the same time raised the concern that “an emphasis on counting and comparing NS and NNS negotiation signals and responses has been too heavily grounded in the assumption that negotiation can make a difference in SLA” (p. 14). Pica therefore called for more longitudinal studies to focus on the impact of negotiation on language acquisition over time.

A 1989 study by Pica et al. (Pica, Holliday, Lewis, & Morgenthaler, 1989) once again set out to analyze the nature of NS/NNS interactions, looking this time at how learners modified their output after receiving signals that native speaker interlocutors had not

understood what they said. This was a small-scale study, with only five male and five female subjects, all of whom were Japanese. Among a range of tasks, the researchers found that “the discussion task was shown to be capable of sustaining the greatest percentages of NS clarification requests, NNS output modification responses in general, and NNS syntactic modifications in particular” (p. 83), which did not support their hypothesis that the information-gap tasks would provide more opportunities for modification, or the findings of Gass and Varonis (1986) and Duff (1986) mentioned previously.

Overall, the findings of studies of interaction conducted in the late 1980s were far from conclusive, and although there was a general consensus that negotiation was still one of the most promising areas of research, some writers were beginning to express reservations about the emphasis on negotiation routines, and most stressed in their conclusions that much work remained to be done before the role of interaction in SLA could be fully understood.

Further Research into the Role of Negotiation in SLA

The attention of researchers in the late 1980s and early 1990s appears to have been focused firmly on the role of negotiation in the learning process, but most of the studies involved NS/NNS dyads, and any benefits for NNS/NNS interaction appear to have been generalized from those findings. For example, in an article reviewing the findings of research into the role of negotiation in SLA Pica (1994) claimed that the evidence suggested strongly that negotiation could benefit learners both by making input more comprehensible and by providing them with feedback that may lead to modified output. However, her review focused on the role of negotiation between learners and native speakers, and there was little discussion of the extent to which findings from these kinds of studies could be extended to interaction between learners. Pica did make the point that “learners and their interlocutors find ways to communicate messages through negotiation, but not necessarily with target-like forms” (1994, p. 518). It would seem reasonable to assume that this would be an even bigger issue in interactions between learners. Furthermore, as with the bulk of research into negotiation, no discussion was made in Pica’s paper of learners’ perceptions of the interactions, either with native speakers or with their peers.

Pica and her colleagues (Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Paninos, & Linnell, 1996) returned to the theme of comparing interactions on communicative tasks between NS/NNS and NNS/NNS dyads in an attempt to find out how well learner interaction could fulfill their need for input, output, and feedback. The authors justified their study by saying that “across a wide range of settings, including second and foreign language classrooms and classrooms oriented to more general-educational pursuits, language learners are frequently and increasingly each other’s resource for language learning” (p. 59). The authors developed a number of hypotheses concerning the effectiveness of learner interaction and tested them on 30 Japanese learners of English using jigsaw-style communication tasks. The study found that learners received more modified input from native speakers than from other

learners, but that the amount of modified output produced was similar regardless of who the learner was talking to. The authors also found that learners did a good job of providing each other with feedback signals that initiated negotiation, although these tended to be simplified, mainly consisting of segmentations of each other's utterances. They also found that there was less negotiation overall in NNS/NNS dyads than in pairs where one of the interlocutors was a native speaker. Pica et al.'s conclusion from this study was that "the finding that learners are a somewhat limited source of modified input warrants some caution toward teachers' confidence in [the use of pair activities and group work]" (p. 80). They added, however, that:

As teachers ask learners to work together on communication tasks, they can be confident that the interaction can assist L2 learning whether the source of that interaction is an NS or another learner. (Pica et al., 1996, p. 80)

The findings of this study are more persuasive than previous studies where the learner dyads were of mixed nationality, but again, Pica et al.'s study focused only on identifying features that were hypothesized to affect language acquisition. It did not attempt to demonstrate these effects over time, and as with previous studies, there was no discussion of how the subjects felt about the different types of interactions. Pica and her colleagues also expressed the opinion that more work was needed to "identify, adapt, or create classroom tasks that encourage and motivate learners to invite, require, and ensure the comprehensibility of their message meaning" (p. 80).

The 1990s also saw a revision by Long of his Interaction Hypothesis (IH). The original version had focused on how interaction could increase the amount of comprehensible input available to learners, but in a new paper, Long (1996) attempted to explain more directly the connection between interaction and acquisition. He proposed that when meaning is made clear through situational context and interaction, sufficient processing capacity is freed up to allow learners to focus on form. Although he recognized that this would not necessarily happen, he suggested that "the chances that the learner will detect the changes, understand them, and incorporate them is likely to be higher than when both form and meaning are opaque" (p. 453). However, Long did not discuss the degree to which the benefits of interaction proposed by this new version of the IH might be expected to apply to interaction between learners. Although he claimed that "tasks that stimulate negotiation for meaning may turn out to be one among several useful language-learning activities in or out of classrooms" (p. 454), he also suggested that "negotiation for meaning by definition involves denser than usual frequencies of semantically contingent speech of various kinds (i.e., *utterances by a competent speaker* [emphasis added], such as repetitions, extensions, reformulations, rephrasings, expansions, and recasts..." (p. 452). The implication of this appears to be that the benefits of interaction for learners come from feedback provided by a more competent interlocutor, and no specific reference was made in Long's paper to situations where lower-level learners interact with each other without input or support from a teacher.

The point about the importance of learner levels was taken up by Williams (1999), who noted that previous research on interaction between learners had not paid sufficient attention to the question of proficiency. Williams conducted a small-scale study that involved recording exchanges between learners as they worked together in the classroom. Recordings of four pairs of learners, each of a different level, were used in the analysis. Williams found that learners of lower proficiency did not often attend to form in their discussions, suggesting that this was because it was simply not possible for them to negotiate meaning and focus on form at the same time. Williams' study was a small-scale experiment that only set out to describe what happened when learners talked to each other, but her conclusions seem to reflect what common sense would lead us to expect. It may be, then, that the degree to which interaction is beneficial for learners depends on both the level of the interlocutor and the level of the learner him or herself.

Conclusion

With the benefit of hindsight, it would seem to be a matter of common sense that the only way to achieve any degree of communicative competence in a foreign language is to use it for real communication. Given the limitations of large class sizes and limited hours of instruction faced by teachers in most institutional environments, it may also seem obvious that without using pair and group work, it will not be possible to give individual students the time they need to practice the target language. It is probably fair to say that these are the main justifications for the use of pair and group work in modern-day language teaching.

With regard to the question of how far this approach is supported by evidence from research, the answer is less clear-cut. Early studies focused exclusively on investigating the frequency of the types of interactions that were *hypothesized* to facilitate second language acquisition. Subsequent research spread the net wider and identified a number of other advantages of peer interaction in language learning. However, there is still a dearth of studies that provide conclusive evidence of the effectiveness of pair and group work. It would therefore probably be fair to say that the current popularity of these types of activities has more to do with intuitive beliefs, common sense, practical consideration, and even fashion than it does with evidence provided by researchers. With this in mind, it might be suggested that the unquestioning adoption of pair and group work in all learning environments may not be as desirable an outcome as advocates of Communicative Language Teaching methodology would have teachers believe.

References

- Aston, G. (1986). Trouble shooting in interaction with learners: The more the merrier? *Applied Linguistics*, 7, 128-143.
- Day, R. (Ed.). (1986). *Talking to learn: conversation in second language acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Duff, Patricia A. (1986). Another look at interlanguage talk: taking task to task. In R. Day (Ed.), *Talking to Learn* (pp. 147-173). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

- Gaies, Stephen J. (1983). Learner feedback: An exploratory study of its role in the second language classroom. In H. W. Seliger & M. H. Long (Eds.), *Classroom oriented research in second language acquisition* (pp. 190-213). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Gass, S, & Madden, C (Eds.). (1985). *Input in Second Language Acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Gass, S, & Varonis, E. (1985b). Task variation and non-native/non-native negotiation of meaning. In S. Gass & C. Madden (Eds.), *Input in second language acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Gass, S, & Varonis, E. (1986). Sex differences in NNS/NNS interactions. In R. Day, R. (Ed.), *Talking to learn: conversation in second language acquisition* (pp. 327-351). Rowley, MA.: Newbury House.
- Hatch, E. (1978a). Discourse analysis and second language acquisition. In E. Hatch (Ed.), *Second Language Acquisition*. Rowley, MS: Newbury House.
- Krashen, S. (1985). *The input hypothesis: issues and implications*. New York: Longman.
- Krashen, S. (1994). The input hypothesis and its rivals. In N. C. Ellis (Ed.), *Implicit and Explicit Learning of Languages* (pp. 45-77). London: Academic Press Limited.
- Long, M. (1977). Group work in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language - problems and potential. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 31(4), 285-292.
- Long, M. (1981). Input, interaction and second language acquisition. In H. Winitz (Ed.), *Native language and foreign language acquisition: Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 279.
- Long, M. (1983). Linguistic and conversational adjustments to non-native speakers. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 5(2), 177-193.
- Long, M. (1985). Input and second language acquisition theory. In S. Gass & C. Madden (Eds.), *Input in second language acquisition* (pp. 377-393). Rowley, MS: Newbury House.
- Long, M. (1986). The oral approach and situational language teaching. In J. C. Richards & T. S. Rodgers (Eds.), *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (pp. 31-43). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Long, M. (1996). The role of the linguistic environment in second language acquisition. In W. C. Ritchie & T. K. Bhatia (Eds.), *Handbook of second language acquisition* (pp. 413-468). London: Academic Press.
- Long, M, Adams, L, McLean, M, & Castanos, F. (1976). *Doing things with words: verbal interaction in lockstep and small group classroom situations*. Paper presented at the TESOL '76.
- Long, M, & Porter, P. (1985). Group work, interlanguage talk, and second language acquisition. *TESOL Quarterly*, 19(2), 207-228.
- Pica, T. (1987b). Second language acquisition, social interaction in the classroom. *Applied Linguistics*, 8(1), 3-21.
- Pica, T. (1987c). Do second language learners need negotiation? *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 34(1), 1-19.
- Pica, T. (1994). Research on Negotiation: What does it reveal about second-language learning conditions, processes, and outcomes? *Language Learning*, 44(3), 493-527.
- Pica, T., Holliday, L., Lewis, N., & Morgenthaler, L. (1989). Comprehensible output as an outcome of linguistic demands on the learner. *Studies in second language acquisition*, 11, 63-90.
- Pica, T., Young, R., & Doughty, C. (1987a). The impact of interaction on comprehension. *TESOL Quarterly*, 21(4), 737-758.
- Pica, Teresa, & Doughty, Catherine. (1985b). The role of groupwork in second language acquisition. *Studies in second language acquisition*, 7, 233-248.
- Pica, Teresa, Lincoln-Porter, Felicia, Paninos, Diana, & Linnell, Julian. (1996). Language learners'

- interaction: how does it address the input, output, and feedback needs of L2 learners? *TESOL Quarterly*, 30(1), 59-84.
- Porter, P. (1986). How learners talk to each other: input and interaction in task-centred discussions. In R. Day (Ed.), *Talking to Learn: Conversation in Language Acquisition*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.
- Porter, Patricia A. (1983). *Variations in the conversations of adult learners of English as a function of the proficiency level of the participants*. Ph. D. dissertation. Stanford University.
- Richards, Jack C., & Rodgers, Theodore S. (1986). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schmidt, Richard W., & Frota, Sylvia Nagem. (1986). Developing basic conversational ability in a second language: a case study of an adult learner of Portuguese. In R. Day (Ed.), *Talking to Learn: conversation in second language acquisition* (pp. 237-327). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Swain, M. (1985). Communicative competence: some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development. In S. Gass & C. Madden (Eds.), *Input in second language acquisition* (pp. 235-253). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- VanPatten, B., & Williams, J. (Eds.). (2007). *Theories in second language acquisition*: Routledge.
- Varonis, E, & Gass, S. (1985b). Task variation and nonnative/nonnative negotiation of meaning. In S. Gass & C. Madden (Eds.), *Input in Second Language Acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Williams, J. (1999). Learner-Generated Attention to Form. *Language Learning*, 49(4), 583-625.